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ABSTRACT

According to the Bureau of Census, almost 13 million Mexican-Americans live in the United States. Since parental involvement is important to the success of Mexican-American children in school, an analysis of the role of trust in such involvement is presented in this paper. It reports the findings of a study that explored the issue of trust as it relates to parents and their involvement in their children's education, and it provides a theoretical conceptualization of trust. Three themes emerged that relate to trust and parental involvement: parents who defer rather than trust, parents who trust too much, and parents who distrust. The findings indicate that the existence or absence of trust between the home and the school affects the development and sustenance of meaningful parental involvement. It is suggested that trust is one area in which school personnel and policy makers must focus their attention and efforts; schools must examine and eliminate the barriers that have been erected, while creating opportunities for culturally and racially different parents to become meaningfully involved in their children's education. Some suggestions for building trust and avoiding distrust are offered. (Contains 20 references.) (RJM)

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Importance of Trust in Increasing Parental Involvement and Student Achievement in Mexican American Communities

by

Michelle D. Young

"All children can learn." This statement has become a mantra for educators across the nation. However, schools are finding it more and more difficult to educate all the children, particularly children who are not members of the Anglo middle and upper classes. Mexican-Americans, for example, suffer very high drop out rates and low scores on standardized tests of academic achievement. In Texas, where this study took place, over 19% of Mexican-Americans aged 16-19 leave school before graduation (US Bureau of the Census, 1990), and nationally the drop out rate is even worse for this group. Around 30% of students of "Hispanic origin" aged 16-19 have left school before graduation (NCES, 1992, p. 110)[1] Further, Mexican-Americans as a group consistently score at the low end of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) (Texas Education Agency, 1997). Among the reforms and innovations being used to address this issue, parental involvement in education has received increased attention.

Many researchers agree that children's education and development are affected positively when their parents are involved (Delgato-Gaitan, 1991; Epstein, 1983; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Henderson, 1987; Hoover-Dempsy, 1997; Rioux & Berla, 1993). However, the parents of ethnically diverse parents as well as low-income parents do not participate in the schools in the same numbers as Anglo middle and upper class parents (Calabrese, 1990; Comer, 1984; Fine, 1993; Fuller & Young, 1994; Laosa, 1983; Sheridan, 1992).[2] Researchers attempting to understand why non-majority parents tend to be less formally involved have determined that school practices are key. For example, studies have associated low levels of involvement with poor relationships between parents and school personnel (Sheridan, 1992), a lack of willingness to share power with parents (Fine, 1993), a failure among school personnel to learn about their parent population (Calabrese, 1990). In contrast, Scribner, Young and Pedroza's (1996) work in schools along the Texas-Mexico border indicates that school personnel who reach out to parents personally, who treat parents with respect and kindness, and who demonstrate to parents that they are working hard to provide a high quality education for their children encourage higher levels of parental involvement--both formal and informal. Similarly, Fuller and Young (1994) argue that meeting the educational needs of all children is facilitated when school personnel work to build a sense of trust between school personnel and family members.

The concept of trust has become commonplace in discussions of school culture (Barth, 1990; Bryk, 1993; Cunningham & Greso, 1993; Kratzer, 1997; Starrat, 1991). For example, Kratzer (1997), who argues that trust is an essential component of positive school communities, examined the ways in which urban schools manifest characteristics of community such as respect, caring, and trust. Similarly, Cunningham and Gresso (1993) assert that in organizations:

> Trust allows a person to feel comfortable and safe, to express true beliefs, to unleash and thus maximize the individual's and group's potential . . . [it] releases energies that were previously consumed in neurotic efforts to cover up. When trust exists, knowledge and skills are acquired most effectively, and outcomes are maximized. (p. 130)

Thus, one could argue that the nature of parental involvement in a particular school community is related to level of trust that exists in the school.

In this paper, I report the findings of a study that explored, among other things, the issue of trust as it relates to parents and their involvement in their children's education. I begin by discussing the research methods and context. Second, I explore the relationship between trust and parental involvement. After providing a theoretical conceptualization of trust, I examine three themes related to trust and parental involvement: parents who defer rather than trust, parents who trust too much, and parents who distrust. My contention is that the existence or absence of trust between the home and school affects the development and sustenance of meaningful parental involvement. The paper closes with a discussion of practices for building trust and avoiding the development of distrust.

Research Methods and Context

The Study

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger pool of findings ascertained through a research project focused on understanding the nature of involvement among Mexican-American mothers from low-income communities in their children's education. In order to grasp the complexities of participation and the power of theoretical frames, qualitative research methodology as well as a traditional and a critical perspective were used in two waves of research. Research took place at an elementary school in an urban area of Texas that serves a predominantly Mexican-American and low-income community.

The first wave of research took place during the summer of 1996. After identifying informants, intensive individual interviews were used as the main data gathering tool (Patton, 1990). For the first substudy interviews were conducted with school administrators, teachers, mothers, and school and district level parent training specialists. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and these data were analyzed through open and axial coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Trustworthiness (i.e., validity) was promoted through the triangulation of methods (i.e., in addition to interviews, observations and documents were analyzed), and by comparing my analysis of the data with that of a colleague familiar with my research methods and theory.

At the end of the summer, I began contacting mothers for the second wave of the research. Data collection continued through the following Spring.[3] In this wave, I utilized the following data sources: intensive individual interviews, observations,[4] and documents. After identifying mothers and the women who taught their children, a "snowball" sampling technique was used to identify other important informants for the study (Patton, 1990). Sixteen individuals were interviewed on one or more occasions for this phase of the research. Observations of interactions, meetings, and activities that involved parents as well

as informal conversations and interviews were transcribed into a field note journal. Data were analyzed through unitization and categorization (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Trustworthiness (validity) was supported through several means: 1) reflecting on the process, my impact on the research project, and my biases throughout the project, 2) triangulating methods, 3) collaborating with a key informant, and 4) comparing my analysis of the data with the analysis of a colleague familiar with my research methods and theory.

The School

Chavez elementary is housed in a twenty year old school building with Aztec designs ornamenting the facade and foyer of the building and a mural covering the walls of the library, demonstrating the Mexican cultural influence on the school. The school grounds are spacious and shaded by old pecan trees. The play ground and fields are always open and one can often see groups of young men playing football or soccer there in the evenings. The Chavez community echoes the shrieks of children at play, shouts of saludos between neighbors, and the sound of Tejano music spilling from radios. Colorful wooden homes, some large and some small, line the roads surrounding Chavez. It is an old neighborhood; several research participants asserted that it was the oldest barrio in the city. They also indicated that it was a "good place--a safe place for kids." However, many community members are concerned that the neighborhood surrounding the school may soon change. The area's economic growth has not kept pace with the rest of the city, and unemployment and poverty rates[5] are high. When compared to the rest of the city, 18.3% more people in this area live below the poverty line (US Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Several characteristics set Chavez apart from other schools that serve predominantly Mexican-American students. For example, Chavez is considered a year round school. It commences at the beginning of August and breaks for several weeks in November and March and then releases for the summer in late June. Additionally, Children in Pre-Kindergarten through grade six attend Chavez. It is unusual for an elementary campus to have sixth graders in this district because the district has adopted the middle school concept. Other interesting characteristics include its governance correlates, dual language program, after school enrichment classes, Project Read, Family Math nights, and multi-age grouping.

In planning for the 1996-1997 school year, parental involvement was included in the Campus Improvement Plan, along with the technology and dual language programs, as a "major area of emphasis" (Chavez CAC Team, 1996). Accordingly, parents and family members were encouraged to be part of the school community in various incidental and planned ways. There were ample opportunities to eat breakfast or lunch with their children and frequent opportunities to meet with teachers and administrators, both formally and informally. Further, the Campus Advisory Council and several other advisory groups provided opportunities for parental involvement. The school's mission, "as an innovative effective school, is to increase the academic and social growth of its students by providing a conducive learning environment and promoting parental involvement" (Campus Improvement Plan, 1996, p. 5).

The Findings

Parent involvement, as a practice and a concept, is affected by a multitude of complex phenomena. These aspects include, to name only a few, grade level, school practices, belief systems, culture, feelings, relationships, resources, and trust. Thus, each individual, each school, and each community is likely to have a distinct understanding of parental involvement, a diverse set of rationales that connote why they feel involvement is or is not important, and a unique way of encouraging involvement. In this study trust and/or distrust affected each of these elements. The degree of trust affected (and was affected by) understandings of parental involvement, rationales for the (un)importance of parental involvement, and the practices used to encourage involvement. In this section, three themes related to trust and parental involvement are discussed: parents who defer rather than trust, parents who trust too much, and parents who distrust. However, before we can begin to explore the relationship between trust and parental involvement, it is necessary to describe what is meant by trust in this particular context.

Trust in Context

Over the past few decades, the issue of trust has become a topic of interest for a growing number of social science researchers. Researchers in areas such as business (Kramer & Tyler, 1996), economics (Zuker, 1986), and organizational theory (Baier, 1986) increasingly view trust as an essential element in organizational effectiveness (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997). More recently, educational researchers have become interested in the role trust plays in the public schools (Fuller, 1996, 1997; Fuller & Young, 1994; Hoy, 1985, 1986, 1992; Krantz, 1997; Larson, 1997; Tarter & Hoy, 1988; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1997; Young 1997). These scholars argue that trust is an intrinsic element of effective relationships in educational organizations, and therefore, attention must be given to understanding the dynamics of trust in schools.

Trust can be conceptualized in a number of different ways. For example, Rotter (1967) defines trust as the expectation that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of an individual or group is reliable. Similarly, Frost, Stimpson, and Maughan (1978) define trust as an expectation that the behavior of another person or group would be altruistic. Zand (1971) defines trust in terms of behavior--actions taken that increase one's vulnerability to someone else whose behavior is not under one's control. Typically this action would take place under conditions where the penalty one suffers if the other abuses that vulnerability is greater than the benefit one gains if the other does not abuse that vulnerability. Similarly, Coleman (1990) has defined trust simply as committing to an exchange before you know how the other person will reciprocate. Alternately, Baier (1985) provides a description of trust as reliance--reliance on another's competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm, things or persons one cares about or which are entrusted to their care. Finally, Cummings and Bromily (1996) defined trust as "an individual's belief or a common belief among a group of individuals that another individual or group 1) will make good-faith efforts to behave in accordance with any commitments both explicit or implicit, 2) will be honest in whatever negotiations preceded such commitments, and 3) will not take excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available" (p. 57).

This above definitions of trust, while not exhaustive, enable one to grasp the primary components of a trusting relationship. These include expectations and vulnerability. That is, when individuals trust, they typically do so based on a belief that the other party will do what is expected of them. Further, when entering into a trusting relationship people expect that they will not be taken advantage of.

These definitions have been used by scholars to explain and describe relationships among and between people as well as variables. However, it is important to ask: do these definitions have relevancy in this particular context? When one is applying trust as an analytical framework understanding how those in the context being studied define the concept is important. While few of the parents in this study actually used the word trust, many talked about their expectations of the school (e.g., caring for and teaching their children, being honest), their confidence (or lack of) in the teachers, the importance of feeling respected and welcome by school staff, and the vulnerability they felt in certain encounters with school personnel. A number of parental expressions of trust can be found in the data. For example, one mother in explaining why she liked the school stated that it felt "almost like family." She went on to say that both she and her children were treated very well and that she felt her children were safe at the school. Another mother said that she knew she could "rely on the teachers to do a good job teaching." Thus, parental definitions of trust included the following elements: 1) confidence that personnel at the school will act in the best interest of their children; 2) confidence that teachers are qualified to teach their children; 3) confidence that school personnel will treat them fairly; and 4) confidence that school personnel will keep their word.

Misinterpretations: Parents Who Defer Rather Than Trust

On the surface, the definitions provided by Chavez parents do not appear much different from the scholars noted above. However, there are also a number of cultural factors to consider. For example, the concept of "respeto" (respect) is a cultural tradition requiring the expression of deference when interacting with others (Harry, 1993). It is based on a belief that one must interact with others with respect and dignity. When Mexican-American parents encounter school professionals a "generalized deference" comes into play (Lauria, 1968, p. 72) as do "culturally based assumptions of noninterference on the part of parents in school matters" (Harry, 1993, p. 100). For example, one of the mothers participating in this study had a concern about her daughter not-receiving an award but she was hesitant to confront her daughter's teacher with the issue. She stated:

> To my daughter it means a lot to be a Leo leader. I thought that you know you could get two tardies. I mean if you got two tardies then you couldn't be a Leo Leader, but it must be a mistake. I will have to talk to her teacher because I need to ask her. I talked to her (daughter) about it and I said "I still think you are a Leo Leader." So I still treated her like a Leo Leader. But I think I should still talk to the teacher....you know you could get two tardies. Maybe, if it happens again I will.

Similarly, another mother revealed that even when you do not agree with a teacher about something, "It is better if you pretend to agree that they are right." Bennet (1988) has also highlighted the role of

deference in Mexican-American parent behavior. Bennet showed that even parents who were extremely critical of the school in their interviews, showed "the face of respeto (respect), which often took the form of a seemingly respectful silence as school staff did their thing" (p. 150).

Due to a lack of awareness and/or understanding of these cultural factors, many school personnel may mistakenly believe that they have developed parental trust when in actuality, what they are experiencing is parental deference to authority. Both the principal and vice principal of Chavez appeared to be under the impression that parental trust in the school was very high. For example, the vice principal stated:

> I get the sense that parents at this school have a pretty high level of faith in the school itself - in The principal as a leader, and in the teachers. I have been places where I felt like parents didn't really feel very good about the school or didn't really trust that the school was necessarily always working in their best interest. And I don't feel that here. You know, we certainly have had dissatisfied parents, and parents who are unhappy with the situation, and will come up and will tell us about it. And that's fine. I'm glad they feel like they can come up and tell us about it, and something will be done...

If parent-school interactions are bound up within such cultural factors such as the tradition of "respeto," then how do school personnel know whether they truly have the trust of the community or if what they are experiencing is actually deference? According to Lauria (1968), when Mexican-American parents come into contact with school professionals a "generalized deference" comes into play. One mother's complaint illustrates this assertion.

> My son got into trouble one time--a fight--it wasn't his fault even, but they sent him to the alternative school. I could not believe it! It wasn't his fault but he so... But what could I do about it? They had already decided to send him away to the other school.

This comment indicates the existence of deference and reveals more a sense of powerlessness on her part than a sense of trust. She did not feel she could challenge the school's decision and deferred to its authority instead. Harry (1993) points out that "it is particularly hard for parents who feel they have no power. . . to confront the very authorities to whom they must, everyday, entrust their children" (p. 166).

Additionally, according to tradition, persons of superior authority (e.g., school personnel) are also obligated in the system of respect to express "deference to the subordinate's self through the proper symbolic acts" (Lauria, 1968, p. 44). To my knowledge, school personnel were generally unaware of both this obligation and the cultural tradition underlying deference. This lack of knowledge may have led to misunderstandings. For example, one teacher stated:

> I've worked with the community for a few years now and I don't know. They just don't ask many questions. I tell them what I think and then that's it. They rarely disagree or offer other explanations. It just "OK." I used to think I was just, you know, right. But now I sometimes wonder if they are listening.

It is very likely that this teacher does not understand the cultural practice of deference. Further, her failure to reciprocate, as well as the failure of other school personnel, can lead to a loss of self esteem for the

parents. If this teacher understood the practice of deference, she might have understood the silence and acknowledged something that the mother had done. For example, she could have said: You have done such a wonderful job raising your son." Furthermore, if this teacher better understood the tradition of respect, she would not have simply told "them" what she thought. Harry (1993) points out the importance of gaining the parents' perspective. Gaining their perspective demonstrates to parents that you value what they have done to support their children and that you value the information they have to offer.

Parents Who Trust Too Much

A second way the concept of trust emerged from the data was as parents who trust too much. Research on parental involvement has found that the school is a symbol of authority for many Mexican-American parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987: Harry, 1993). Consequently, some parents may uncritically trust the school or defer to the school to appropriately care for and educate their children. This was the case for several of the parents interviewed at Chavez elementary. One mother said: "I think Chavez is a good school. I like it, my kids like it. . . . The teachers are good, helpful. They care about the kids, I think." While it is very important that the school maintain a caring, safe, and familial school environment, it is also important for parents not to completely give over to the authority of the school.

To illustrate, the cultural practice of trust or deference leaves no check on administrator power. For example, at one PTA meeting the principal was explaining the recent changes in their student's TAAS scores. Although there was an increase in most areas there was a substantial decrease in scores at one grade level. Only one parent spoke up during the explanation. Interestingly, the parent who asked the question was a father, the PTA co-president, and the only father present. He asked why these particular scores were so low. The principal provided a number of reasons that included among others: newer teachers at that grade level, non-aligned curriculum, cultural bias in the test, and a new state rule that restricts students who are limited English proficient from taking the Spanish version of the TAAS more than one year. His explanation went unquestioned. Neither the father nor any of the mothers said a word. According to Harris (1993) not questioning authority figures is common among ethically diverse parents. It may be difficult for these parents, particularly the mothers, to openly express their disagreement with school personnel because of the effects of their status inequalities and the school norms that place parents in a relatively powerless position.

An additional example of how parent trust can go too far was provided by the schools parent training specialist. Over the course of her six year tenure, the parent specialist has had a positive impact on the home-school relationship at the case school. It is believed that she knows a large number of parents and that she reaches out to the parent community as a whole. According to several interviewees, many parents feel more comfortable contacting the school parent specialist, than school administrators or even teachers. In fact, one mother indicated that she would always call the parent specialist if she had a question about anything. When asked why, she replied: "she is someone you can feel comfortable with--someone I can trust."

Further, during the time the specialist has been working with the parental involvement program, her role has broadened. She now plays a role in finding resources and services for families. The principal noted that she has been particularly helpful to "families in crisis." For example, she worked closely with a family who became homeless, assisting the mother in obtaining shelter and food for her family and ensuring that the children continued attending school. This family however appeared to have trusted the specialist and the school too much. The specialist told the following story.

> So, this particular homeless family, they were form San Antonio, and originally they told us that the reason they had moved was just because it was just getting too expensive to live in San Antonio, and that they had lost their home, that they had lost everything. Well, as I continued to work with them, it became evident that the real reason they had left was for fear of their lives. They were... the grandmother's son had been killed in a gang fight. They ended up living by the park. Grandmother with three kids, mom with 4 kids. I called churches for food and other relief, the salvation army, even one of our parents for his Taquitos. They experienced more problems with molestation at the shelter so they spent their evenings in the park. I gave them blankets. The Americorp volunteers, John was his name, he took them to the kids. I fixed fishing rods for the kids for their birthdays. John taught them to fish. There were problems with one boy who was the helper. The mother and grandmother disagreed and fought a lot regarding sex, discipline, etc... I visited one or two times a day, I took them to the clinic. I also collected faculty donations for them. The police were trying to run them out so they hid. In the cold and rain and ice they moved into an abandoned home. Fairly soon after the bad weather started, the grandmother moved back to San Antonio. The mother was then left alone. She wanted to go into Mexico to find her husband, but we told her the children need to stay in school. A cafeteria woman volunteered to take care of the 2 boys who were with the mother still. The mother wasn't sure whether or not she should. I knew the cafeteria woman and she is a good person, and I told that to the mother. And the cafeteria woman assured her that they would be well cared for and that she could see them whenever--just until she got back on her feet. The housing list was very long and nothing materialized from other agencies either. She was desperate and decided to leave the boys. She kept looking to me to promise every thing would be OK. I thought it would, but I knew I couldn't promise. The mother went to Mexico to find the father for help and left the boys with the cafeteria woman. While she was gone the cafeteria woman filed for guardianship and got them. I didn't know this--not at first. The mother then returned and found that the boys had been legally taken away from her because she abandoned them! Both the mother and grandmother were upset. The grandmother came up to school and made a lot trouble. Our principal asked the grandmother to stay away from our school and not to cause trouble. What could he do, she didn't have a legal right. The children had told the cafeteria woman that they were abused, but I am not certain whether that was true. The cafeteria woman put them in a different school and has them in counseling now.

The mother in this story was described as desperate. She was in a difficult situation, but she was searching for ways to improve her and her family's situation. First, she moved away from gang violence. Then after her family became homeless, she removed them from a shelter where she believed her children could have been molested, and she began searching for assistance from social service agencies. When no assistance seemed to be forthcoming, she decided to find her husband in Mexico. However, school personnel pressured her to keep her children in school. What was she to do? People she trusted, people who had helped her and provided her family with blankets and food were asking her to either stay in a horrible situation for her children's sake or to leave her children with a school staff member while she sought relief. After choosing the latter alternative, she returned only to find that her trust had been betrayed. Her children had been taken from her. She had no resources to fight for them, her life situation would be unlikely to convince a judge that they would be better off with her, and the principal turned her mother away when she came to the school to see the children and object to the guardianship change.

It is an understatement to say that in this case trust went to far. Here it was more than a parent trusting too much. Here a parent was misled to believe that she could trust school personnel a great deal more than was in fact the case. Here a parent's trust was betrayed. School personnel must be aware of situations such as this one. Parents and families who are in difficult situations can place a great deal of trust in schools that have shown a willingness to help. This trust should be handled delicately and responsibly.

Parents Who Distrust

A third way of understanding the data in terms of the concept of trust is examining incidences of distrust. Compared to the parents of Anglo children, many Mexican and African-American parents are more suspicious about schools' agendas and more anxious about the possibility that their children will encounter prejudice and discrimination (Fuller & Young, 1994). Ogbu (1991) asserts that, within the ethnically diverse family, there exists an underlying mistrust of the dominant Anglo society and the school systems which it controls. Such mistrust simply compounds the difficulties stemming from the cultural and language differences students from diverse backgrounds already encounter in school. Ogbu further observes:

> Since minorities do not trust the school and those who control the schools, they are usually skeptical about the schools' ability to educate their children. This skepticism is communicated through family and community discussions and gossip, as well as through public debates over minority education. Another factor discouraging academic effort is that minorities--parents and students alike--tend to question school rules of behavior and standard practices, rather than accept and follow them as the immigrants appear to do. Indeed, minorities sometimes interpret the school rules and standard practices as an imposition of the dominant group members frame of cultural reference, which does not necessarily meet their educational needs . . . under these circumstances, it is probably difficult for children of minorities,

> especially the older ones, to accept and follow the school rules of behavior and to persevere at their academic tasks. (Ogbu, 1987, p.28)

In this study, several mothers expressed their distrust of certain school personnel. One informant asserted that the school tried to hide information from parents. She stated:

> I think that some parents are not aware of some of the things that go on here, if they were aware of, I think they would definitely say something, be more vocal. Like the system that of passing children on. . . . They don't tell parents what is going on. You know, the children are not academically ready to be moved on to the next grade level, but, because there is a very negative attitude about retention, and I understand that, that I think it's just a shame. Because you have some parents thinking that their kids are doing well, and they're being passed on, and they're able to handle the work at the next grade level. They should at least be honest with the parents.

The mother quoted above discovered the problem of "social promotion" only after her son entered junior high school. She indicated that she had been very upset when his junior high teachers told her how far behind he was. She stated: "I cannot trust a teacher or school that doesn't teach my child and doesn't take responsibility for the problem. They just pass the problem on to someone else." Another mother reported that she distrusted the school because the principal did not listen to her when she complained to him about a teacher who she felt was discriminating against her son.

> She would say bad things and told other teachers he was a trouble maker--right in front of him. She gave him low marks; they should have been more higher. I think it is because we don't speak English very well. I don't know what's her problem. So I told the principal. And he did nothing. He didn't listen. No.

Further, one teacher reported that several parents had moved their children to other schools because they felt that the school and school staff were either uncooperative or not meeting the needs of their children. In reflecting on these "transfers" the principal explained that it was the parents who were demanding and uncooperative. "There are always a few of those every year." Regardless, the act of leaving the school for such reasons is an obvious sign of parental distrust in the school personnel.

Trust and Parental Involvement: A Discussion of the Findings and Implications

In this paper, it has been asserted that consequential relationships exists between trust and parental involvement and parental involvement and student achievement. In the previous section, parental experiences at Chavez were identified and analyzed in terms of trust in an effort to understand more clearly the nature of trust and relationships of trust at this particular school. It was found that school administrators and most parents believed that trust was an important component in building home school relationships. However, it was also found that relationships built on trust are complex, consequential, and come with important responsibilities. This portion of the paper is divided into two main sections. In the first, I explore the analysis of trust presented above. Subsequently, I delineate the implications for practice that can be drawn from this analysis.

Trust and Parental Involvement

When families send their children to school some form of home-school relationship is inevitable. The ability to develop a positive and trusting home-school relationships depends in part on the knowledge and understandings that school personnel hold about families in their school communities. Of particular importance to the development of trust at Chavez, is an understanding of how culture, gender, and socio-economic status affect parental beliefs and actions. For example, it is fair to say that, in all Western industrial countries, mothers are expected to take primary responsibility for their children. This understanding of maternal responsibility holds true regardless of women's marital status, social class, employment status, or ethnic group (David, Edwards, Hughes, & Ribbens, 1993). Variabilities in the nature and extent of this responsibility, however, are affected by these attributes. The majority of families whose children attend Chavez are Mexican-American, and the majority of parents who are involved in their children's education are women. For these two reasons alone, school personnel should be aware of the way that social class and gender affect parental involvement.

As described earlier in this paper, the concept of "respeto" (respect) and the practice of deference[6] to authority contribute to patterns of noninterference on the part of parents in school matters. In the home-school relationship, female subordination may be further compounded by traditional Mexican-American gender roles (i.e., the "man's place is en el mundo, in the world, and a woman's place is en la casa, in the home" (Gil & Vazquez, 1996, p. 6). According to Moser (1993) the domestic ideology that assigns women responsibility for domestic duties, also places women in a subordinate role to men. The reproductive role is not given the same importance as the male's productive role. Frequently, this subordinate role is internalized by women, leaving them feeling less important and less powerful. A possible consequence of this internalization is the reinforcement of the practice of deference.

It is important then that school personnel become familiar with the cultural beliefs and practices of the families in their school community and that they take these cultural differences into consideration when they are planning for reforms, such as parental involvement. As demonstrated in this paper, certain patterns of behavior can be mistaken for trust. Such a misinterpretation could lead to the premature abandonment of efforts to build trust.

In the previous discussion, a story was told about a homeless mother who trusted the school too much. When planning efforts to increase parental involvement and build relationships of trust, school personnel must recognize that with trust comes responsibility. School personnel should be careful when working with such families because it is likely that in their efforts to help or show compassion they may make suggestions that turn out to be unhelpful or harmful or they may make commitments that they cannot deliver. School staff should be provided with inservice that provides referral information and strategies for working with, what the parent training specialist called, "families in crisis.".

Finally, there will be incidences where, despite the efforts made by school staff to build trust, parents develop a distrust of the school or specific school personnel. When this occurs, it should be immediately addressed and interventions should be designed and implemented. Further, school

personnel should reflect on such incidences and learn from them. "We must ask whether our systems are designed for communication or for control, for questions or only for answers, to empower or to disempower students and their families" (Harry, 1993, p. 114).

Implications for Building Trust

A strong positive relationships can be developed between the school and home through parental involvement, and when building this relationship, the development of trust can play a prominent role. However, trust takes time, effort, and serious commitment to build, and the efforts made to build trust must be contextually relevant. According to the informants who participated in this study, there are several practices that can contribute greatly to the development of trust between their home and school. In addition to developing cultural understandings of and cultural sensitivity, these practices include: communicating , collaborating, sharing power, and developing participation skills.

Communicating. The development of trust requires effective communication. When members of a school community communicate effectively there are fewer misunderstandings and members of the school community are better informed. Effective communication is two-way; that is, it is a dialogue. It involves both listening and being heard. Further, effective communication is practical and presented in lay person's words. Finally, effective communication is sensitive communication. At Chavez, effective communication is facilitated in several ways. First, information is presented in sensitive ways. Second, one of the primary responsibilities of the school's parent specialist is to improve communication between the home and school. Third, increased emphasis is being put toward making parents feel that they are being listened to.

A concerted effort has been put forth to communicate with families in a personally and culturally sensitive way. As one teacher put it, "We must remember we are working with the precious treasures of these families." Another teacher commented:

> Personal contact--it is the only proper way to contact a parent in this culture. You have to do it if you want to build a relationship. Every year I try to make personal contact with each of my children's parents. I try to do it as early as possible. I think my students have benefited from it.

Similarly, while written communication dominates the discourse that occurs between the home and school, the school has made efforts to increase the amount of verbal communication. This change in communication strategy was spurred both by parental requests and teacher recognition of the importance of the requests. The mothers asserted that they preferred verbal communication to written notes, and they preferred personal contact to telephone calls. When her little boy started having a little difficulty in school, Rene said the called her on the phone and let her know what was going on and asked Rene to talk to the child. Rene said she was really glad that the teacher had called her. She said she then talked to her son about his behavior and school work.

> I said "You have to follow the rules, you have to listen, you know, if you want to do this or that, (whatever we're going to do for the week-end or Saturday), you have to listen in school. You

have to follow the rules, you have to do good." I just talked to him. He started doing better. Yeah, this week-end he was a Leo-Leader.

Recognizing the number of Spanish speakers in their community, Chavez has, for a long time, provided all written correspondence in both Spanish and English. However, the same attention did not appear to be given to level of readability. Factors such as this should be considered because, according to Harry (1993), written communication already signifies the formality and power of the school. If it is unreadable it is likely to be even more intimidating, particularly for a culture that prefers personal contact.

The full time parent specialist supported communication between the home and school. She understood the importance of "personalismo" (personalism). In this context personalismo was supported by having a full-time parent specialist allows parents access to a particular individual in the school who is focused on their needs and issues. This person-to-person contact allowed a personal rather than a professional relationship to develop. Each of the mothers and several other school community members mentioned the importance of having a full time parent specialist.

Listening is another critical element in communication. Listening is much more than hearing what one says. It also involves acknowledging the value of the person and that person's ideas, feelings, and experiences. According to Kreisberg (1992), "in order to maximize listening. . . each person must be willing to express his or her opinions and be willing to listen to the perspectives of others. Each must be assertive yet open" (pp. 127-128). Relationships work when people listen and are listened to. Rene feels that her concerns have always been listened to and addressed. She said she has never felt as if her wishes or concerns were ignored.

Reaching out in culturally sensitive and sincere ways can dispel negative feelings toward schools and enhance the teachers' stature in the eyes of the parents (Marion, 1989). Such actions can reduce the isolation and suspicion that result from limited contact and negative experiences (Banks, 1993). Erickson (1987) argues that open communication and relationships built on trust can facilitate the bridging of the culture of the classroom and school with that of the family. Moreover, two-way meaningful discourse provides multiple opportunities for parents to voice their concerns. School administrators can facilitate the development of their staff's ability to communicate in several different ways: First, principals can identify those staff members who are skilled in working with parents and ask them to serve as mentors to other staff members; and second, principals can provide or lead staff development on home-school partnerships, issues of diversity, effective communication, and cultural sensitivity. Regardless of the method utilized, once a positive, open, and mutually respectful communication pattern is established by the school, these parents will be more likely to trust in the school (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993).

Collaborating. Collaboration is defined by Kasting (1994) as "a partnership built on mutual respect, shared decision making and shared understanding" (p. 150). One major element in the development of home-school partnerships over time is trust (Epstein & Conners, 1994). Since relationships of trust develop when people share ideas, beliefs and philosophies and when people take risks together (Short, 1993), or, in other words, collaborate . When educators do involve ethnically

diverse parents as partners in their children's education, the parents develop both a sense of efficacy and an increase their commitment to the school (Cummins, 1986). One Chavez mother revealed: "when I meet with the teacher and we discuss my child's progress I feel good. I feel like we are working as a team and that we are getting something done." She went on to explain that she not only feels good about such collaborative activities, but these interactions also positively affect her opinions of her children's teachers and the school as a whole. Similarly, teachers who are more oriented toward collaborating with parents reported more positive feeling about the parent population and parent abilities, and these teachers were more supportive of parental involvement in general.

Collaboration between teachers and parents and among teachers provides opportunities to meet and share ideas, failures, and successes. Several teachers discussed how collaborative parent-teacher relationships were much different from the traditional method for keeping parents informed of student progress. One teacher said: "It is great, when the relationship is collaborative, there is more communication. We discuss concerns, progress, and successes. I know I can rely on that parent and they know they can rely on me." This type of interaction also builds support for teachers trying new programs or practices or improving on existing ones.

Collaboration, however, does not occur as the result of an administrative decree--it must be cultivated (Kreisberg, 1992). Part of the cultivation of collaborative relationships at Chavez will require a change of attitude. According to one teacher, the teaching staff is skeptical about both parent willingness to get involved and the benefits versus costs of getting them involved. Many teachers were frustrated because past efforts to increase parental involvement received low parental response. Thus, the teaching staff must be reminded of the importance of their efforts and be given hope regarding the outcomes of their efforts. The literature on parental involvement should be helpful in these efforts.

The goal should be fostering an environment that is sensitive and helpful where teachers and parents can interact, share and support one another's efforts. Within a context of trust and mutual respect one can be more open to learning and to change. Collaboration within the school must become the modus operandi.

Sharing Power. Closely related to collaboration is sharing power, another key component of building trust. For the purpose of this paper sharing power is defined as the involvement of ethnically diverse parents in school decision making. Unfortunately however, both at Chavez and nation-wide, few parents are actually involved in school decision-making (Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Chavkin and Williams, 1987).[7] Moreover, the majority of parents who are involved in school decision making are those conforming to and supporting the existing White, middle-class culture of the school. Conversely, ethnically diverse parents are usually underrepresented (Calabrese, 1988; Moles, 1993), especially on committees responsible for the development of school policies regarding discipline procedures and other rules and regulations (Calabrese, 1988). The decisions of these unbalanced committees often foist the Anglo norms of behavior upon all students while ignoring the cultural norms of behavior of the ethnically diverse groups represented within the school (Calabrese, 1990). As a result, these students are often

disproportionately disciplined by the school staff (Felice, 1981). In his research, Ogbu (1991) found such practices contribute to minority students and parents sometimes viewing school policies as an imposition of Anglo culture upon ethnically diverse students. Likewise, Calabrese (1990) argues the neglect of differing cultural perspectives in the development and implementation of school policies and procedures contributes to the perception of the school as a hostile, discriminatory entity unresponsive to the needs of ethnically diverse students. Ultimately, ethnically diverse parents and students learn to distrust the Anglo school system.

If schools hope to develop relationships of trust, they must ensure parents are equitably represented on all school decision making committees, especially on committees responsible for discipline procedures and other school policies. Simple participation, however, may not be enough to ensure proper representation due to the inequities in the committee members' abilities to exercise power (Scheurich and Imber, 1991). According to Scheurich and Imber (1991), each member of the group must have an equal voice in the decision making process if ethnically diverse views are to be equitably and accurately represented. In order to ensure equality of voice, principals should provide all committee members with training on creating an environment in which all voices are listened to, respected, and in which all participants can have relatively equal access to the decision-making process.

Developing Participation Skills. Kieffer (1981), in his study of community activists, argues that participation and collaboration require the development of participatory competence. To be true collaborators parents must have the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively. Several training programs at Chavez are geared toward helping parents participate effectively. For example, the Americorp program provides math and literacy skill training to parents in an effort to develop their ability to participate in their children's education. Additionally, the parent specialist and school counselor have offered a class entitled Parent to Parent. This course focuses on how parents can become involved in drug prevention. Other parent training courses that have been taught at the school in the last few years are Cara y Corazon, a course on essential values of the Mexican-American culture, and Mega Skills, a course that focuses on improving parenting skills and increasing parent knowledge.

Unfortunately, the school has not developed or organized a course that teaches parents how to become active participants in the school. It has also neglected to provide parents with an opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding of the school and skill in participation. If ethnically diverse parents feel they lack the knowledge and competence to operate within the bureaucratic structure of the school, they may involve themselves at lower levels or not at all (Lareau, 1987). Developing parental knowledge of the school system has the potential to empower parents (Cummins, 1986). In her ethnographic study of Mexican-American students, Delgado-Gaitan (1988) found that the school under study fully expected all parents to participate in their children's schooling, but, according to her, the school never provided the means by which parents could learn how to relate to the school in a positive manner. To believe school personnel would be able to successfully teach ethnically diverse parents how to fully participate in the educational process when they have traditionally failed at educating their children is naive, at best. .

Schools could, however, develop contacts with local community members, such as local clergy, members of advocacy groups (i.e. MALDEF, IDRA, LULAC, or Interfaith), or parents who have successfully interacted with schools, and enlist their assistance in helping these parents develop the skills necessary to interact effectively with the educational bureaucracy (Reyes & Capper, 1991). Andrews and Morefield (1991) found that ethnically diverse parents who experienced success in their dealings with the school are often willing to volunteer to train less successful parents in advocating for their children. Such a strategy, according to Reyes and Capper (1991), tend to provide a more relaxing and trusting atmosphere for the parents. A caveat, however, is in order: when using parents to train other parents, the casting of school staff as experts should be avoided.

Advocacy programs, such as those developed by Marion (1979), Baca and Cervantes (1984), Sour and Sorrel (1978), Riley (1978), and Tessier and Barton (1978) can be used as models in the development of the advocacy training component. These programs focus on informing parents of their legal rights, on teaching parents about the education system, and on training parents how to advocate for themselves and their children. However, care must be taken to tailor the program to the specific needs and concerns of the Chavez parent population.

The discussion and practices provided above are not an exhaustive and do not provide a precise prescription for schools to follow. Each individual school, in cooperation with the community which it serves, must reflect on its current educational program and its relationship with the community in which it is embedded. Based on this self-reflection, the school and the community must jointly determine which strategies are likely to be the most effective in creating a sense of trust within the minority community.

Conclusion

According to the Bureau of the Census (1994), there are almost 13 million Mexican-Americans living in the United States. Close to half of these citizens are school-age. Among Mexican-American students, the drop-out rate is steadily increasing and many children are behind grade level (Sosa, 1993). Given these statistics, efforts such as those to increase parental involvement, and thus relationships of trust, should be given increased attention and support.

Currently, Mexican-American parents are involved at much lower levels than Anglo middle-class parents. This generality held true at Chavez elementary. The findings from this study suggest three factors, related to trust, that may have contributed to this problem: the misinterpretation of deference as trust, the development of too much trust, and the growth of distrust.

Trust is foundational to much of what happens in schools. The existence of trust is important to the development of parental involvement and, thus, the academic achievement of non-majority students (Fuller & Young, 1994). In fact, according to Talbert and McLaughlin (1993), trust is crucial to the development of behavioral norms in the school that support the learning of all school community members. Thus, it is important that efforts be put forth to support the development of relationships of trust in schools.

When a school initiates and implements programs, policies, and procedures with the express intention of seriously meeting the needs of the students, then the school can begin to develop an environment in which the community can begin to rightfully place trust in the local school and its staff. The components of trust which must be developed within the school community include: 1) confidence that personnel at the school will act in the best interest of their children; 2) confidence that teachers are qualified to teach their children; 3) confidence that school personnel will treat them fairly; and 4) confidence that school personnel will keep their word. While these components were taken from the definitions of trust provided by Chavez parents, it is likely that they have relevance for schools who are working with other non-majority populations.

Trust is one area in which school personnel and policy makers must focus their attention and efforts; we must examine and eliminate the barriers that we have erected, while creating opportunities for culturally and racially different parents to become meaningfully involved in their children's education. As with all reforms efforts, however, we must take care to ensure the contextual relevance of the plans we implement to develop and sustain trust. As shown in this paper, cultural differences can lead to misinterpretations and misunderstandings. We must take care to recognize and nurture the real thing.

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Footnotes

[1] Of the Mexican-Americans living in Texas who are over age 25, less than 45 % have a high school education (US Bureau of the Census, 1990). Nationwide, around 30% of students of "Hispanic origin," aged 16-19, have left school before graduation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992, p.110).

[2] Several researchers, working with the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), have claimed that minority parents are actually involved at higher rates than non-minority parents. However, the questions used to ascertain the type and level of involvement were less than illuminating in this regard.

[3] On September 10th, 1996, I gave birth to my first son, Ethan. After his arrival, I did not physically visit the school for a month. However, I did maintain contact with several staff members during this time through email and by telephone.

[4] Although I initially acted more as an observer, overtime, I became more of a participant observer.

[5] The city as a whole was recently rated as medium-high for income, while the Chavez neighborhood was rated low (Cole, 1996).

[6] While the power of culture may vary however for Mexican-American groups according to the cohesiveness of the group-identity in the area where they live, Gil and Vazquez (1996) discuss the great psychological pull that Mexican-American women feel from their family's cultural beliefs and expectations. Thus, there is little doubt that many(particularly women) individuals retain a strong sense of cultural identity despite the length of contact they have had with the dominant culture.

[7] Unfortunately, the state of Texas and school district in which Chavez is located have, in one sense, created a climate in which principals are less likely to share power: principals, alone, are held accountable for the student performance.